

7 May 2016

Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Ms. Dortch,

Since December of 2015, I've had the displeasure of becoming familiar with the prison communications industry after my younger brother was arrested and put in jail. He is currently incarcerated in a jail in Indiana that has a contract with JailATM, run by Tech Friends Inc., a company offering messaging and video-visitation services.

Clark County Jail, where my brother still awaits conviction, does not allow in-person visitation. Learning that I would not be able to see him face to face was one of the most marginalizing moments of my life. There is a tremendous amount of connection lost between people when they can only speak through video screen, connection that helps families stay strong and decreases the chances of recidivism once inmates are released.

Adding to my family's feeling of helplessness is the fact that JailATM's products are low quality and their website is full of technical problems. I have used their messaging system as well as their from-home video visitation option. Each message is limited to 1,800 characters, including spaces, and costs \$0.50, making standard mail a more economical option. My brother, who was diagnosed with dyslexia as a child, has a very hard time typing a message in the allotted 15-30 minute time limit set by jail administration for kiosk use.

I avoided using the from-home video option for a long time because I could find absolutely no pricing information about it on JailATM's website. I was only able to get an answer about this after locating the parent company, in tiny print at the bottom of the webpage (Figure 1) and calling them directly, as no contact information is available directly on JailATM's website. After I finally got an answer about how much it would cost to do a from-home video visit, I ended up completely disappointed with the experience. The picture quality was poor and if I didn't keep my head perfectly centered in the camera's view, the picture went completely black on my brother's end. We both ended the conversation feeling like the visit wasn't worth the \$6.00 I had paid for the 15 minutes we were allotted.

Another serious problem I have encountered with JailATM is the issue of scheduling visits from different time zones. I work as a field biologist and move each season, which means I am often moving between time zones. The JailATM website is set up so that times offered when you are scheduling a visit are based completely on what time zone your computer is set to in your computer settings. However, the

website will ultimately translate whatever you put in as your requested visit time to the time zone entered into your JailATM profile. This complicated system has resulted in delayed visits with my brother and could easily result in missed visits as well. An easy solution would be to show all times offered and scheduled in the time zone that the jail itself is in since that will never change, whereas the time zone the visitor may be working from can change from day to day. See figures 2, 3 and 4 for details.

My very lowest point with JailATM came when I received an email (Figure 5) to my personal account from them with the subject line “Jeremy Pollom needs your help.” My heart rate went through the roof. My first instinct was that he might be hurt. I opened it to find that it was just a triggering marketing technique used by JailATM to try to get family members to purchase more products for their loved ones. In this case they wanted me to purchase a “Gold Access Pass” to give my brother internet access for a 24-hour period.

Depriving families of in-person contact is inhumane and counterproductive to the goal of rehabilitating our prison population. For me, knowing that this switch from in-person visits to video-visits has been largely profit driven has been salt in the wound of having my little brother in jail. My family has suffered tremendous financial and emotional loss from this experience and knowing that there are companies out there taking advantage of our desperation to keep supporting each other is sickening. I am asking the FCC to step in and make sure that families like mine aren’t abused by companies like JailATM through usage fees, price-gouging, and contractual limitations on correctional institutions to end in-person visitation.

I have also attached an op-ed I recently wrote for Truthout about the negative experiences I have had using JailATM’s products.

Sincerely,

Emily Pollom

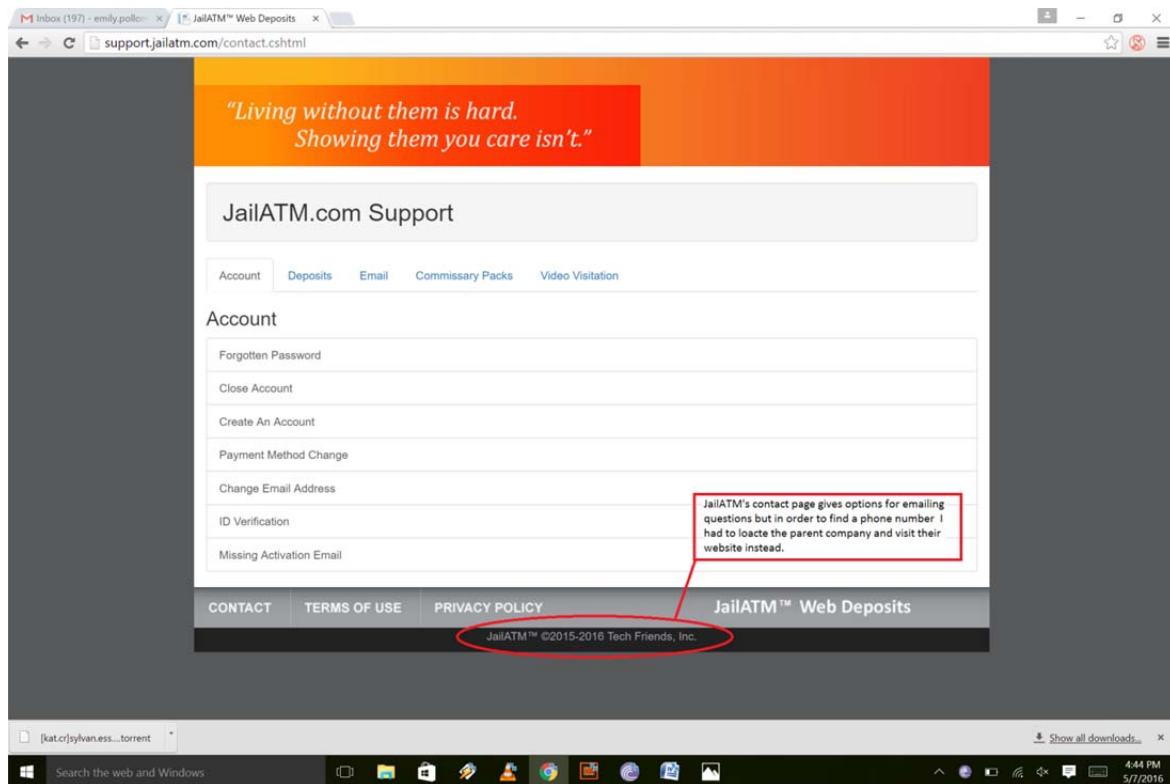


Figure 1. JailATM's parent company displayed in small text at bottom on "Contact" page.

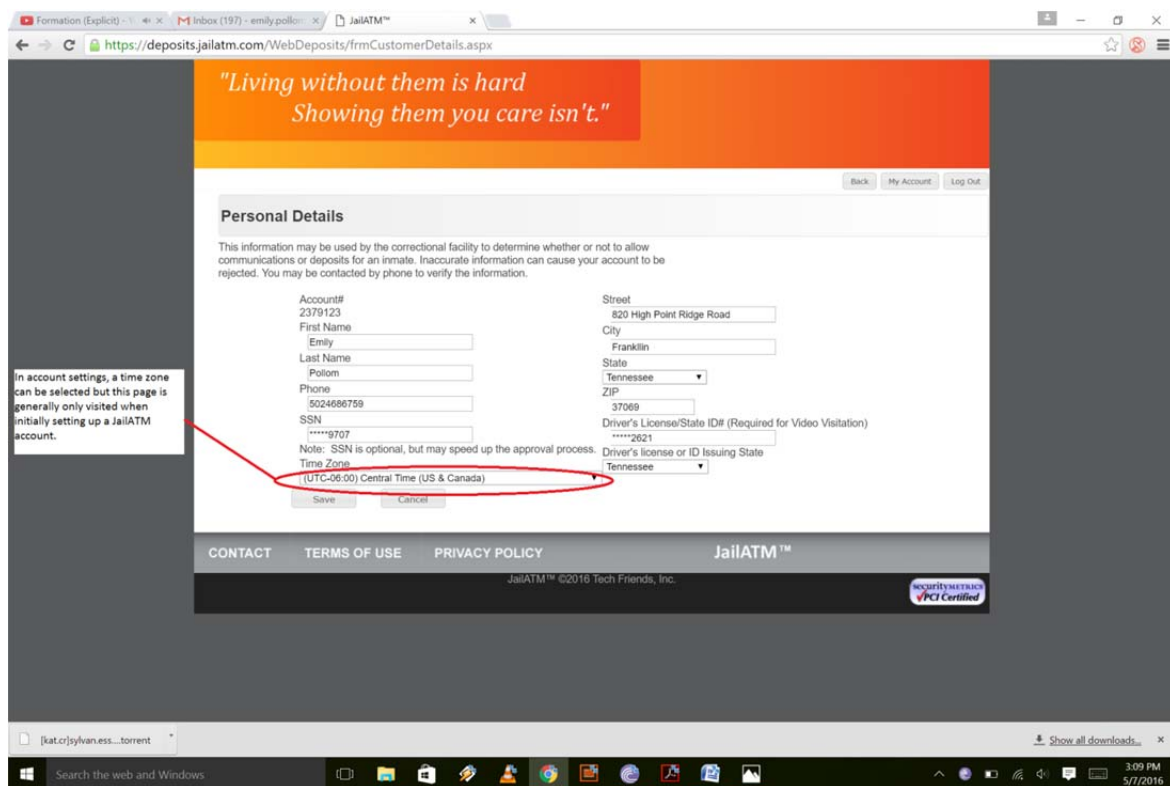


Figure 2. Time zone is selected in my account settings.

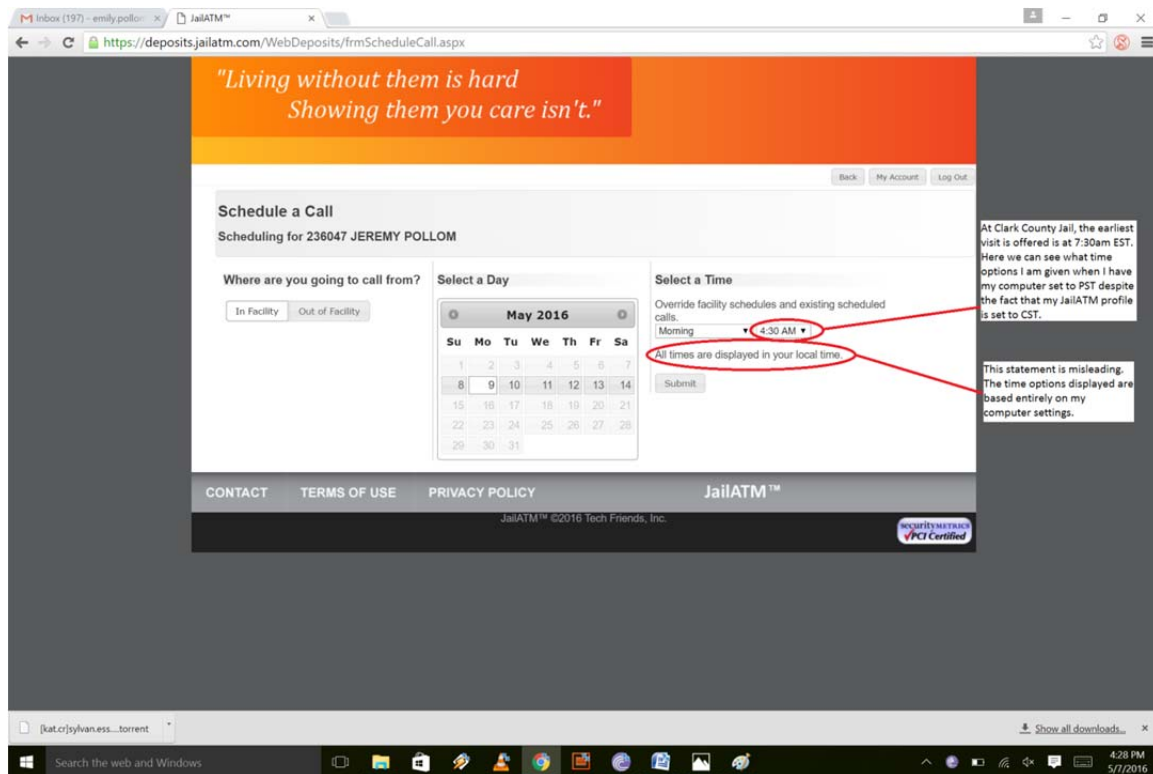


Figure 3. Times displayed as options for a visit match up with my computer settings but not my JailATM account settings.

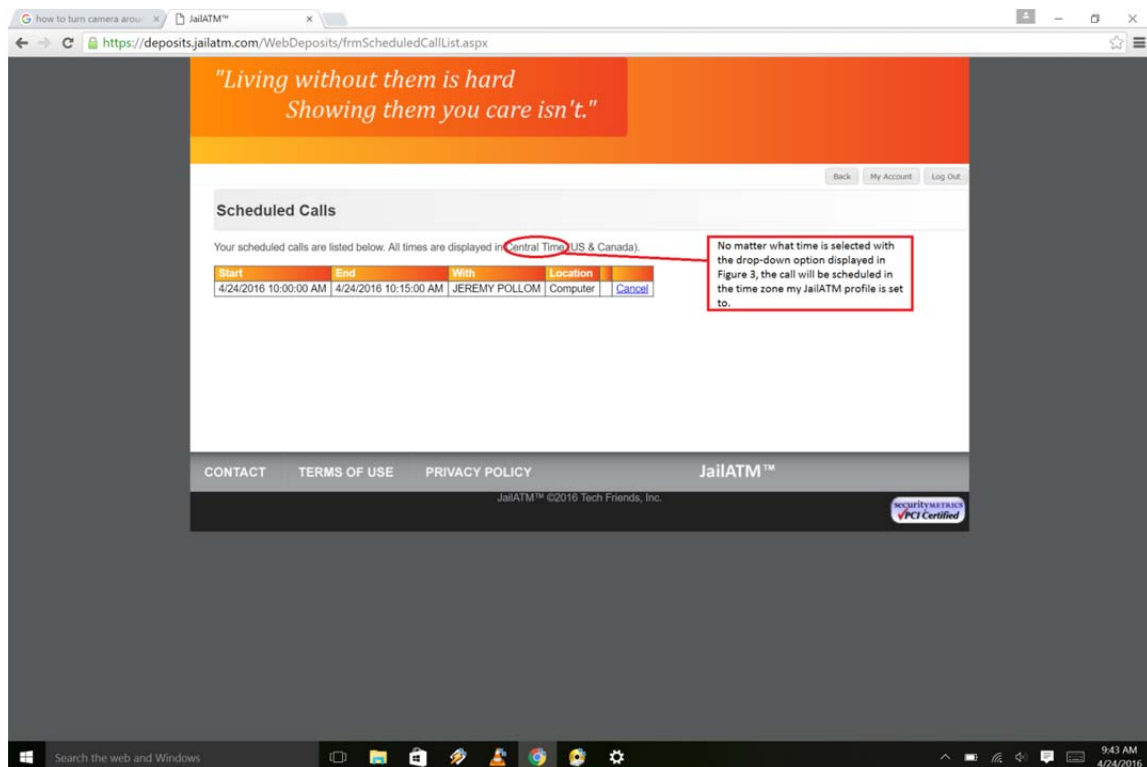


Figure 4. After scheduling a call, I am shown that the call will be in CST despite whatever times were given as options in Figure 3.

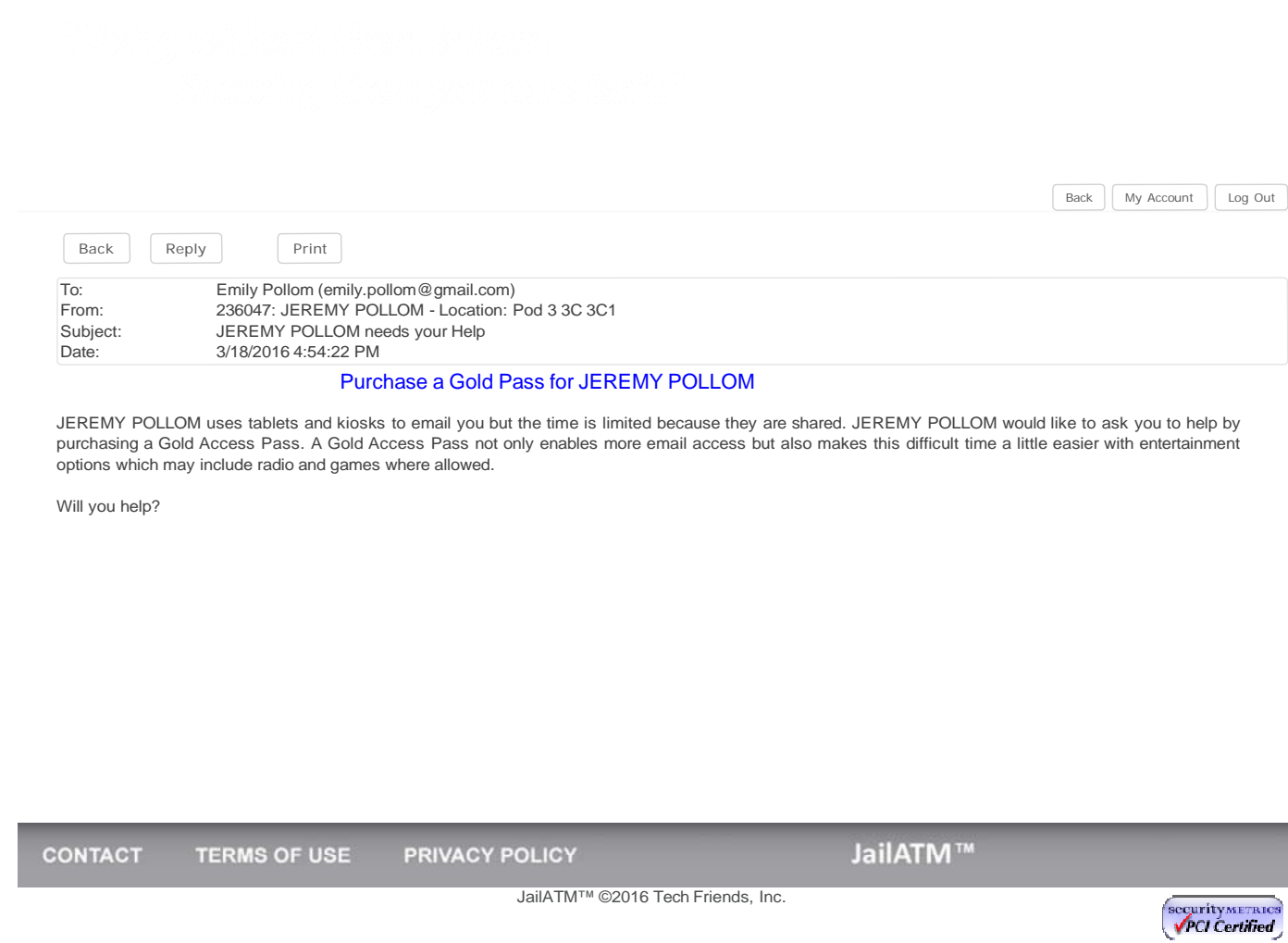


Figure 5. Triggering marketing email I received to my personal account from JailATM.

Punishing Families: How the prison communication industry weakens family ties

Emily Pollom

Anyone who has had a loved one locked up knows it's not easy. But I didn't realize how much it would feel like being kicked while you're already down. My brother has been incarcerated in a county jail in southern Indiana since December and has yet to be convicted. Trying to support him has been an uphill struggle.

The first kick came when I learned that my parents and I can't even see my brother face to face. Instead, my parents and I are forced to go to the jail to "visit" through video. The jail doesn't see the difference, but looking at his face through a tiny scratched up screen, through which eye-contact is impossible, can only be called a visit with the best of imaginations. According to the criminal justice research nonprofit, [Prison Policy Initiative](#), hundreds of jails nationwide, persuaded by private tech companies hawking their new product, have given in to this same harmful thinking to largely eliminate in-person visitation.

But these jails are ignoring how much this video "innovation" fails. On Christmas, I saw a family arrive with young children dressed up in their finest attire to visit their incarcerated parent. What did they get for choosing to spend their Christmas in a jail? The visit was cut short to three minutes because of technical glitches. It was heartbreaking.

The sad truth is we're lucky when our visits happen at all. Despite the fact that visitors must schedule video visits 24 hours in advance, visits are canceled at the last minute. Sometimes the internet goes out at the jail. Other times my brother is in a different part of the jail and no one cared to move him to the area where he can receive video calls.

I'm doing everything I can to stay in touch with my brother, but it often feels like everyone involved is trying to take advantage of our family's hardship. Once, I received an email with the subject line telling me that my brother needed help. My pulse went through the roof. "Is he hurt?" I thought. I opened the email to find it was a marketing strategy that JailATM uses to prey on vulnerable families. It was asking me to purchase a "Gold Access Pass" so that my brother could have greater email access and entertainment options. JailATM should think twice before using triggering marketing tactics to sell its product.

The funny thing is that, on paper, I am the perfect customer for JailATM. I work as a field biologist and move each season so visiting in-person is difficult. Each week I send my brother four letters in the mail and a couple emails at fifty cents a pop. At-home video visitation, another product offered by JailATM, should be a great way for me to stay connected, but it's not easy to get yourself to spend hard-earned money on high-cost, low-quality products.

Video visitation could be a win-win-win for families, companies, and correctional institutions if technology improves and prices are kept low. It could make it easier for incarcerated persons to connect with their young children and family members who live far away. However, it should be a supplemental option to in-person visitation, not a replacement.

The good news is the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is trying to protect family members like me from paying too much to companies that don't deserve our money. The FCC approved strong regulations of the related prison and jail phone industry that charges \$1 per minute for phone calls and requested comment on video visitation last October. Unfortunately yet unsurprisingly, the companies challenged the phone rate caps in court, and the court has temporarily blocked parts of the regulations. As our country questions whether incarceration is the best way to rehabilitate, can we really justify punishing not only incarcerated people but their families too? It's time for the Federal Communications Commission to protect captive customers.